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## **The Value of Confession**



## **The Value of Confession**





# The Value of Confession

BY

**SELDEN PEABODY DELANY**

DEAN OF ALL SAINTS' CATHEDRAL

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

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## INTRODUCTION

The natural instinct of normal-minded people is to share with their friends and with mankind in general any good thing they have discovered. If we have been stimulated or inspired by a book or a play, for example, we hasten to tell our friends about it. It would be inhuman to keep it to ourselves.

There is no reason why this principle should not apply to religious practices which we have found helpful and satisfying. Would you not feel grateful to any man who had made a thorough trial of some religious practice unknown or untried by you, and found it helpful, if he should tell you about it? Most people would. Therefore it is here proposed to take up sacramental confession from this standpoint. There are many Christians who have found it a practice well worth while. They are convinced that one's religious experience must be meagre and incomplete without it. Therefore they hasten to commend it to their friends.

This little book is an attempt to express the value

of sacramental confession, as felt by such people, in the hope of commending the practice to their friends.

At once the question arises, how may we best commend it? Shall we seek to show that it is the mind of the Church, as set forth in her official formularies, that we should thus make use of the power of absolution which Christ committed to His ministers? Or shall we appeal to history to prove that this practice has prevailed in the Church from the very beginning,—at first in the form of public confession before the whole congregation, and later in the form of private confession before the priest as representative of the Church? Or shall we select such texts in the Bible as may rightly be adduced as showing that confession is in accord with the Divine plan of salvation?

No, we may be quite sure that none of these is the best way of commending the practice of confession to-day. The modern mind is strangely impervious to the appeal to authority. You may tell people that the Church says they must do this and must not do that, or that the Bible commands it; and they will look at you with a dazed, pitying expression, and remain unmoved. You may even appeal to the tradition of nineteen centuries of Christian experience; and they will retort that they cannot see why they should do as their fathers have done in religion, when they have (so they think) progressed beyond the ways of their fathers in everything else. No, the only appeal that is likely to have any effect to-day is what may be called the prag-

matic appeal. One man urges another to take up the practice of confession, because he can testify from his own experience that it works. This experience is corroborated by the experience of thousands of our fellow men and women to-day. They have found confession peculiarly adapted to their deepest spiritual needs.

Similar testimony to the value of confession is often heard to-day from those who have never tried it. They cannot say that they have found it to work; but they do say they think it ought to work. Such testimony comes from the most unexpected sources. Some years ago people were wont to dismiss the subject very briefly by saying, "Oh, I have no use for confession; only Catholics go to confession." But now we are continually reading in the newspapers that some prominent Protestant leader has come out in favor of confession. At a recent convention of the Young People's Society for Christian Endeavor in California, for example, the Rev. Charles M. Sheldon, an eminent Congregational preacher and writer, said that Protestantism should restore the confessional. A few years ago the following appeared in the editorial columns of the leading weekly of the Unitarians, *The Christian Register*:

"The question is asked whether Methodism has a confessional or not. Of course it has; every family, every church, every community, has need of a confessional more or less organized and properly conducted. Roman Catholics are human beings, like the rest of us, and Protestants blunder greatly when they reject every-



thing used by Catholics and described by them under some technical name. Prayers for the dead are as rational as prayers for the living, and he who believes in a future life and in remedial discipline has no occasion to scoff at the doctrine of purgatory, although he may balk at the decree of eternal punishment. Every right-minded minister in normal relations with the people of his parish will sometimes find himself called upon to discharge all the offices of a spiritual priesthood. He will receive confessions, give counsel, and in a proper sense pronounce absolution; and both he and those who consult him will be better for his offices."

Such plain speaking as that,—and it is becoming increasingly common,—ought to clear the air of prejudice, and enable us to deal with the practice of confession on its merits. The question then before us is, what is the value of confession? What is there in the practice that makes those who use it say that it works? The following chapters are an attempt to answer these questions.

## **The Sense of a New Beginning**



## CHAPTER I

### THE SENSE OF A NEW BEGINNING

It is the testimony of many who have made conscientious use of sacramental confession that it gives them a sense of making a fresh start in life with a clean slate. ✓ →

The ordinary moral experience of Christian people is something like this: they go along for a considerable period perhaps with only an involuntary slipping into little sins every day; then a period of carelessness sets in, when the little sins become more frequent and voluntary; finally there is a general letting down of moral standards and ideals, and this soon results in a serious fall into grievous sin.

Such a lapse would ordinarily lead to a long spell of depression and discouragement.

ment. Confession prevents that by bringing about a quick recovery. The fall is repented of with shame and contrition, the little sins that led up to it are recalled, and the penitent forms an earnest purpose of amendment. Then come the words of absolution: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power in His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen." The penitent arises from his knees with a consciousness that a burden has been lifted which was too heavy for him to bear. He looks out upon a new world: the sunlight seems more golden, the sky a deeper blue. He goes back to his home and his daily tasks a new man, with strong resolves to live from that day forward a truer Christian life.

✓ This sense of a new beginning, with a soul not only cleansed from sin but refreshed and invigorated, gives a powerful

impetus to one's moral and spiritual life. This is of course more or less true of all new beginnings. The boy entering a new grade in school, after the summer vacation, takes up his studies with renewed enthusiasm and high ambitions. The mistakes of the past year are forgotten; his record is clear; there are no demerits marked down against his name. If school were continuous and there were no vacations nor promotions, much of this valuable impetus would be lost. So it is in the spiritual life. There must be a definite break with the past, a squaring of accounts, the turning over of a new leaf, a fresh start. All this is supplied most completely by sacramental confession.

Why may we not receive the same impetus if we confess our sins privately and directly to God, without the intervention of a priest? Because that kind of confession does not bring the same definite conviction that the past has been cleaned up and a new beginning has been made. This is doubtless because one hears no declaration of absolu-

tion or forgiveness. It is one thing to confess your sins to God and hope that He has forgiven them; it is quite another thing to confess your sins to God and then hear the words of absolution pronounced by His accredited representative: "By His authority committed unto me, I absolve thee from all thy sins." That kind of confession brings a definite assurance of forgiveness, which clears the mind of anxiety and stimulates the will to more heroic efforts in the future.

It is probably the experience of most people who go to confession that immediately after confession they go on for many days, not only without any serious fall into sin, but even without feeling any great temptation to their besetting sin. Before their confession, that temptation had seemed so formidable that they had little hope of being able to overcome it; but after their confession, it has shrunk to so insignificant an attraction as to be negligible. Of course this experience may not continue very long. The brightness of the cleansed and forgiven soul is soon clouded over by

the breath of evil. It will very soon need to be cleansed again. But who would deny that the frequent cleansing of the soul from the stains of sin, and the consequent impetus toward a better life, and the ensuing period of refreshing respite from temptation, are of immense value as factors in our spiritual development?

Those who do not make use of sacramental confession, but simply use the ceremonial form of general confession in church, or confess their sins to God in the privacy of their own homes—if they really make a sincere effort to repent—would doubtless say that they do feel convinced that they are making a new beginning after they have thus confessed their sins. Let us hope they do. Every sincere spiritual effort ought to bring some compensation of this sort. But what is here being maintained is that the sense of a fresh start, and the consequent impetus toward a higher life, which result from sacramental confession, are much more intense in degree, if not absolutely different in kind. This is



an assertion which cannot be proven, except by the person who has tried both ways of repentance. With very few exceptions it would be corroborated by all serious minded people who have taken up sacramental confession conscientiously in adult life, after having long been in the habit of simply confessing their sins directly to God. Their first sacramental confession meant something entirely new in their spiritual experience. They felt that a burden had been taken from them, the fog of doubt had been lifted, and a new light had burst upon their inner life; they experienced a joy and a lightness of heart they had not known before.

Sometimes the opponents of the sacrament of penance admit all this, and use it as an argument against confession. They say that confession makes light of sin; it makes the Christian life too easy; it makes repentance a mechanical thing like taking a bath. People who go to confession, it is alleged, feel that they can sin with impunity and then go to the priest and be made right

with God—until they have made their communion, or recovered from an illness, or gone through a crisis in their affairs—and then they commit sin as before. This is a serious charge. What is to be said in reply?

In the first place, it must be understood that absolution has no effect unless the sinner is really penitent; and a necessary element of penitence is a firm purpose of amendment. Unless the priest finds some indication of such purpose of amendment, he has no right to give absolution. But what if the person deceives the priest in this regard? Then absolution given has no effect. One who goes to confession in a light-hearted way, without any serious intention of giving up what is sinful, receives no benefit whatever from the words of absolution. This is the unanimous teaching of moral theologians.

In the second place, it may be said that the above objection may be urged with equal force against direct confession of sin to God. In fact many people do think they can sin with impunity and then repent

sometime in the future. Moreover in such cases there is little fear of God to hold one back in the moments of temptation; whereas, if one knows one must go to confession to a priest whom one respects and fears, this does serve as a powerful restraining influence at such a time.

In the third place, one would be very foolish to think one could sin with impunity on the ground that one can very easily repent and be forgiven, because no one knows what shall be on the morrow. Whatever view of confession we take, we must never forget that we are "dying men in a dying world."

Do you not in your best moments feel convinced of the vast issues at stake in your life? You will come this way but once. This day will never recur. Life is an enterprise of tremendous significance; a business that needs all the capital you can command. Can you afford then to despise or neglect such a store-house of spiritual energy as this that stands in the midst of the highway of life? You may at any time you wish sum-

mon a priest to hear your confession. To him it would be an ordinary act in the exercise of a manifold ministry; but to you it would be a "death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness." It would transform your whole inner life, give you a new sense of values, turn your face to the light, and infuse into you high resolves and a new love for God and His ways.



## **A Help Toward Self-Knowledge**



## CHAPTER II

### A HELP TOWARD SELF-KNOWLEDGE ∨

Socrates said that the wisest man in the world was the man who knew himself. It was the opinion of Jeremy Taylor that "he that does not frequently search his conscience is a house without a window." The great British philosopher, Thomas H. Green, in his *Prolegomena to Ethics*, writes as follows: "Our conclusion then is that the state of mind which is now most naturally expressed by the unspoken questions, have I been what I should be, shall I be what I should be, in doing so and so? is that in which all moral progress originates."

The main reason why there are so few wise people in the world and why the moral progress of the race is so slow is that there



are so few people who really know themselves. Very few know themselves as they really are, as they are known to God. It is strange how easily we are led to accept other views of ourselves than the right one.

A great many people, for example, know themselves only as they were when they were children. It would be ludicrous if it were not so pathetic: these middle-aged people who have not changed their views of their own character since their childhood. They do not know themselves as they are to-day at all; they think they are still the same people that they were twenty or thirty years ago. They do not realize that they have grown up, and that the passing years have left deep marks upon their moral nature.

And then many, who do not take this antique view of their own character, adopt the view of their family or their neighbors. They know themselves only by the reputation which they have acquired among the men and women of their acquaintance. Sometimes a kind friend repeats to them

some damaging criticism which was passed upon them; but more often they are protected from these jarring notes, and hear only the soothing flatteries of friends and kindred. Smooth sayings of this sort help to fill up the monthly letter from a cousin or an aunt. Or perhaps one attains a position in the great world, and has the pleasure of reading about oneself in the newspapers. But the world's view of us at best can only approximate the truth; because our motives, our desires, our inmost thoughts, our secret actions, are rarely made known to the world.

If self-examination is the road to wisdom, why do we not practise it more thoroughly and more frequently? One reason is that we have not the time, or we do not take the time. The world is too much with us. We have all experienced the difficulty of finding time to clean up our desks, to look over old papers, and to destroy letters and papers that have ceased to have any value. When we do get at these papers, we find them covered with dust; they have been

lying there undisturbed so long. It is difficult too to find time to look over our other possessions and sort them out and put them in some kind of order, to find out what we have and where to put it. It is not surprising then that we cannot find time to look over ourselves.

Another reason why self-examination is so rare is that we so easily deceive ourselves into thinking that nothing is the matter. We often see people who are in like manner negligent of their health. They totter along bent and trembling; and they little realize that they are in the grip of a fatal disease, and in a few months will drop in their tracks. And yet they might have prevented it all if they had exercised ordinary precaution and gone to a doctor in time and submitted to a thorough physical examination. If people are so prone to deceive themselves about their physical condition, is it strange that they deceive themselves about their moral and spiritual condition?

Another reason why self-examination is so difficult and infrequent is that too great

familiarity with sin dulls our consciousness of sin. The unfortunate people who live in some wretched hovel in the slums or on a farm do not notice the heavy, rancid stench that renders the house so loathsome to a stranger entering for the first time. Their olfactory nerves have become dulled through familiarity with foul air. So it is with the conscience of many of us. It has become dulled and deadened through familiarity with sin. Our own sins perhaps have become so much a second nature to us that we no longer notice them; or the sins of others press so closely upon us that we live in an atmosphere of sin, and our spiritual perceptions soon lose their keenness.

Even if we do practise some kind of self-examination every night when we say our prayers, that is no guarantee that we shall really know ourselves as we are in the sight of God. We need to effect longer reaches of self-knowledge than can come from looking back over a single day. We must scrutinize the tendencies, the cross-currents, and the under-currents of our

lives, during a whole month or a year, if we would know whither we are tending.

This longer retrospect is what it is so difficult to find a place for in our lives. It takes time and prayer and systematic effort. If it is to be effective, its results should be definitely written down. Otherwise it will degenerate into the spiritually harmful practice of merely roaming through the chambers of the memory. It is human nature to avoid all this trouble and pains, or at least put it off as long as possible. Most people feel that they ought to undertake it some day; but they will not undertake it until they have to.

Now it is one of the strong points in favor of sacramental confession that it compels us to face this task of self-examination. One need not say that people who do not go to confession cannot make a real and searching examination of their own consciences; but simply that they rarely do. On the other hand if we make our confessions before a priest once a month or even once a year, we are driven to a regular and me-

thodical self-examination. And that in turn reacts upon our daily self-examination. If we know that we must give a definite and coherent account of our lives at certain regular intervals, we shall be more careful to discover the sins and shortcomings of each day.

It is human nature to procrastinate. Especially is this true of our attitude toward duties that are difficult and disagreeable. We attack them only when we are driven to it. The experience of most Christians who do not go to confession is probably something like this: they realize the importance of self-examination and repentance before making their communion; they fully intend to take the time to examine their consciences and confess their sins to God; but they are prevented or diverted by one thing after another; and their repentance is finally reduced to a vague feeling of sinfulness as they repeat the General Confession in church. But that is not repentance at all.

If one makes an appointment with a

priest for confession, one is compelled to make a categorical self-examination. It would be absurd to go to confession with nothing to confess. Strangely enough, people have very little hesitation in appearing before God unprepared and unrecollected, and in that condition receiving the most holy Sacrament; while they have a very great reluctance to appear ridiculous before a minister of God. That most people make their communions without preparing for them by any real self-examination is abundantly evident to every priest who has heard many first confessions. Probably the majority of adult communicants, in going to confession for the first time, would admit that never before have they made a definite and serious self-examination. In fact they have never known how to make one. They need to be taught simply and plainly how to go about it, as children are taught.

— “So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). That is the terrible ordeal we must all face some day. There can be no shuffling nor

evasion in our self-examination then. Surely it is the highest wisdom to prepare for this ordeal of the Divine judgment by giving account of ourselves from time to time to the ministers of God, the ambassadors for Christ. May not God have intended it as one of our greatest helps to prepare us for the judgment, when He gave the apostolic ministry the power to absolve from sin?





## **An Aid to Contrition**



## CHAPTER III

### AN AID TO CONTRITION ✓

It is a commonplace of moral theology that there can be no forgiveness of mortal sin unless the sinner has attained to real contrition. Contrition means sorrow for our sins flowing from the love of God. It is the virtue we pray for during Lent every time we say the Collect for Ash Wednesday: "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness."

Most of us have been through the sad experience of receiving an injury from a friend. There is hardly any friendship that

does not have to pass through some such unpleasantness. Of course such an injury from a friend must be followed by an apology; else the friendship cannot go on as it was before. An apology means both an expression of sorrow and an assurance of love. It would not suffice if your friend who had offended you simply came and said, "I did you a great wrong the other day." That would be simply a statement of fact. Neither would it satisfy you if your friend came and said, "I am going to treat you better in the future. I realize that my conduct the other day was at fault, and I will try not to let it happen again." The confession of sin and the resolve to amend are not enough to constitute an apology. What is absolutely essential before the friendship can be renewed is that there must be an expression of sorrow and regret: "I am sorry that I offended you the other day." Moreover there must be in that sorrow the tincture of love. If your friend simply said he was sorry, and did not make you feel that he loved you and wanted to love you in the

future as in the past, you would not feel that the statement was a sufficient ground for the renewal of the friendship.

The relation between the Christian and his God is to be looked upon in the light of a friendship. Sin breaks our friendship with God. That friendship can be renewed only as we renew our human friendships—by an apology. This apology must contain an expression of our sorrow for having offended God; and that sorrow must proceed from our love for God. That is true contrition; and without true contrition there can be no forgiveness of mortal sin.

Contrition has many counterfeits. There are other kinds of sorrow for sin than sorrow prompted by love for God. People are often sorry for their sins because they love themselves. They regret to think they could have fallen so low; they are disappointed in themselves. But that is not contrition. It is what theologians call attrition. Sometimes our sorrow for sin springs from the love of our reputation. People often regret bitterly having committed certain crimes,

because they know that thereby their reputation has been ruined. Such is the kind of sorrow that usually comes to one who has been convicted by the state of some great crime. There is real grief in his heart, but that grief has no relation to God; he is simply lamenting that he has lost his good name in the community.

If we hope to obtain forgiveness of our sins from God, we must have real sorrow in our hearts arising from our love for Him. That does not necessarily mean tears, as it did with S. Peter, when the Lord turned and looked upon him, and "He went out and wept bitterly"; although in warm-hearted, emotional natures contrition does often lead to an outburst of tears. But tears or no tears, it must mean a hatred of sin. It must mean that we would rather lose our right hand than fall into that sin again; that we will do everything in our power to avoid that sin in the future. It will carry with it a sense that we are guilty of having offended against the wonderful love of God; a realization of our base ingratitude in hav-

ing made such a return for all that God has done for us.

This necessary element of repentance is not easy to acquire. It is one of the chief arguments in favor of sacramental confession that it is a powerful aid in the development of real contrition. Confession does tend to deepen and intensify our sorrow for sin. It is not obvious at first sight why this is so. Let us first make sure of the fact.

The very act of telling another person of the wrong you have done helps to make you more deeply sorry for having done it. In this sense no one can deny the truth of the proverb, "Confession is good for the soul." Your child may have committed a grievous sin, and you may know all about it; but you would not feel satisfied that the child was sufficiently sorry for what he had done until he came and told you about it. The chances are that the child would be hard and unmoved until he came and opened his soul to you; and then, likely as not, he would burst into tears. Or suppose you



discovered that a servant working in your home had committed a theft—had taken something from your room. Unless she confessed to you that she had stolen, you would not be convinced that she was really penitent, and you would not wish to keep her longer in your employ. But if she did come and confess to you, you would know she was indeed sorry; and you would be willing to trust her in the future. The same principle holds in the case of confession before a priest.

Now why is this? What is the psychological explanation of the fact that confession intensifies sorrow for sin? Confession to another human being gets the sin out into the light where you can see it and realize it in all its hideousness. By formulating the sin in words, you take it in, you cognize it, you pass judgment upon it, as you could not have done if you had not expressed it in human speech; and that helps you to be more contrite. It is a common experience that the expression of a thought or desire in words makes it more real; we often

do not realize the true character of a desire until we put it in words, and then we marvel at it. The lover does not realize the meaning of his feeling for the woman he loves until he tells her about it; and then he finds he is living in a different world.

It is one thing to feel a vague sense of unworthiness and weakness; it is quite another thing to accuse oneself before another of definite sins: "I have told falsehoods ten times this month," or "I have forged a check for \$100," or "I was intoxicated and struck my wife," or "I have stolen money from my employer." To hear one's own voice confessing such things into a human ear makes one realize, as nothing else can, the heinousness of one's offences against a loving Father. It helps to make one sorry "after a godly manner."

The laws of psychology should be respected by us as much as any other laws of nature; and let us not forget that the laws of nature are the laws of God. If we ignore the psychological law that contrition can be developed only by confession to another,

and keep our sin to ourselves, we must be prepared to accept the consequences—a cold and hardened heart. The New Testament writers thoroughly understood this psychological law. S. James writes, “Confess your faults one to another,” and S. John, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” In commenting on these words of S. John, Bishop Westcott says: “Confession is not only acknowledgment, but open acknowledgment in the face of men. Nothing is said by S. John as to the manner in which such confession is to be made. That is to be determined by experience. Yet its essential character is made clear by S. John. It extends to specific, definite acts, and not only to sin in general terms. The confession is concrete and personal.”

By all means then find someone who will hear your confession. Perhaps you can go to your father or mother; or if married, to your husband or your wife. If this is impossible you might confess to a sympathetic

friend. But why so studiously avoid the one man whom God has appointed and set apart for that purpose, your priest? He is required to respect the seal of confession; he is learned in moral questions; he is presumably sympathetic — within reasonable limits—or he would not be in the ministry; but above all, he has through his ordination what none of the others have—the power to give absolution.



## **The Road to Humility**



## CHAPTER IV

### THE ROAD TO HUMILITY ✓

It is a right instinct which makes us desire to be popular with our fellow men. The desire becomes dangerous only when it leads us to sacrifice principles for popularity. We would say there was something grotesque about a man who preferred to have everybody dislike him. It surely then is a legitimate question, what is the secret of popularity? Well, the thing is not so simple as that. There is no one secret. There are many qualities that tend to make a man popular. But there is one characteristic that we are sure to find in almost all men who are widely liked, and that is humility. They have a lowly opinion of themselves, their gifts, their ability, their importance.



Perhaps this is not so evident at first thought; but when the converse is stated, we see that it is true. That is, we do not like the man who is conceited, proud, and vain; the man who is always boasting about his good qualities or the wonderful things he has done. We may tolerate such a man, and we may admire his natural gifts; but we never become really fond of him. As a steady companion, he soon becomes very tiresome.

But humility is not only one of the secrets of popularity with men; strangely enough it is also a secret of popularity with God. God appears to be very much of the same way of thinking in this matter as we are. He does not look favorably on people who are conceited or proud. This is revealed in our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee, when he went up to the temple to pray, prayed thus: "Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, nor even as this publican. I fast twice in the week. I give tithes of all I

possess." But the publican stood afar off. "He would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast and said, God be merciful to me a sinner." And this is the comment of Jesus: "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

Self-abasement then is the way that leads to exaltation in the kingdom of God. This does not mean a mock humility. It does not mean that we should always be telling people in an unreal way that we have many faults; or trying to convey the impression that we have a lowly opinion of our gifts and faculties, when in reality we are very proud of them. That sort of mock humility is easily detected. It produces a type of character we all thoroughly despise, the Uriah Heep type of character—the man who is always telling us how humble he is. Such a man once encountered a priest, who was reading his office on top of a London omnibus, and thus rebuked him before the

passengers, "You come up here and read your prayers, where all the world can see you, like the Pharisees who prayed standing in the corners of the streets. But I say my prayers as the Master told us to do, in my own closet." "Yes," replied the priest, "and then you come up on top of an omnibus and tell all the world about it!" It is that sort of superficial humility, revealing a hard and invincible pride underneath, which has so often brought into disrepute the beautiful Christian virtue of humility.

Humility, like all virtues in the human soul, is the work of the Spirit of God. But God often uses indirect means to develop virtues in the soul. One of the surest ways of attaining to the virtue of humility is to make devout use of sacramental confession. For thereby we are compelled to face the truth about ourselves, and to acknowledge that truth to a fellow human being. It is difficult to see how one can do this without self-abasement and humility.

To face the truth about ourselves ought to make us humble. As we look back over

the years that are past, we see many things that are not as they should be; and as we look within our souls, we detect many sinful desires and tendencies. We realize that we have often made egregious blunders; and that almost always when we have acted quickly and impulsively, we have acted wrongly. As we compare our actual lives with our ideal of what we ought to be, and above all with the great example of our Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot but abase ourselves and acknowledge that we are miserable sinners.

But it is the disclosure of the truth about ourselves to a priest that is the most humiliating. If the confession is absolutely sincere, it is doubtful if it can ever be an agreeable exercise. It can never be pleasant to reveal our hidden and secret faults to another. This is especially true if the priest who hears the confession is one whom the penitent knows and respects, as is usually and ought to be the case. For think what a man does when he goes to confession. He lets a fellow man enter in and behold

the interior of his soul. After that he can never hold his head high, nor play the part of the self-righteous Pharisee. Even if one has no mortal sins to confess, it is humiliating to take the trouble and pains to confess the little sins which are so damaging to one's dignity.

It is just this humiliating effect of confession that keeps so many people away from it, and leads so many to give it up as soon as they really begin to need it. Pride is very deep-rooted in the human heart; and under the guise of "a decent self-respect" it is widely admired as one of the distinguishing qualities of the gentleman. Nevertheless pride is one of the seven deadly sins. Whatever the world may think of it, pride does not pass current as a virtue in the kingdom of God. With God, "who-soever exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

Humility has never been highly esteemed in the abstract by the world; and yet it has always been a mark of the true followers of Jesus Christ. This is what we

might expect from the beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and "Blessed are the meek"; also from the invitation, "Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly of heart." Humility is unfailingly a characteristic of the saints. Indeed humility is almost a necessary product of the old religion which has begotten and nourished the saints. For the old religion is a religion of authority, to which the individual must submit his private judgment; it is a sacramental religion, requiring the individual to make use of the common channels of grace, rather than seek help in his own way directly from God; it is a religion with a carefully guarded priesthood, whose powers come only through episcopal ordination, and may not be had by a man's simply calling himself a minister of God; and it is a religion which promises forgiveness of sins only to those who humble themselves by confessing their sins to God in the presence of a priest.

No doubt it would be maintained by those who do not believe in sacramental

confession, that it ought to be just as humiliating to confess our sins to God as to confess them to a priest. That is true. It ought to be more humiliating. It ought to be, but unfortunately it is not. The average man has no feeling of shame in confessing the most horrible sins to Him who is a righteous Judge, "of purer eyes than to behold iniquity"; but shrinks from confessing the most ordinary sins to a frail, human priest, who is conscious of many sins and shortcomings of his own. This is probably because the average man has had so faint a vision of God. The great mystics, who have caught glimpses of His glory, would find it far less humiliating to confess to a priest than to confess to God. But few of us are great mystics. Before we can even enter on the mystic way, we must gain humility. One of the surest roads to the attainment of humility is the frequent and sincere use of sacramental confession.

If this practice has not had the effect of making us more humble, it is doubtless because we have not been absolutely sincere

in our confessions. There must be a merciless exposure of the inmost secrets of our hearts. There must be no glossing over, no palliation, no hiding of motives, no holding back of the truth, no sparing ourselves from any humiliation. The priest who hears our confessions must know us as we really are in God's sight; even though we shall never feel like looking him in the face again. That thought—that they shall never be able to look him in the face again—keeps multitudes of people away from confession. But it were far better not to look him in the face again than to lose this opportunity of humiliation. Of course no priest worthy of the name would think any the less of his people for permitting him to see into their souls; he would only think more highly of them for having the courage thus to humble themselves.





# **The Healing Touch of Jesus**



## CHAPTER V

### THE HEALING TOUCH OF JESUS ✓

On one of the busy days of His Galilean ministry, our Lord had barely landed on the shore of the lake when the people of Gennesaret "ran through that whole region round about, and began to carry about in beds those that were sick, where they heard He was." S. Mark adds this general comment, "And whithersoever He entered, into villages, or cities, or country, they laid the sick in the streets, and besought Him that they might touch if it were but the border of His garment: and as many as touched Him were made whole" (S. Mark 6: 56).

This is wonderfully symbolic of the presence of Jesus in the midst of this suffering,

sinful world. The gospels picture Him as standing in the midst of the multitude, the source of healing and power and forgiveness; and as many as touch Him are made whole of whatever plague they had. This was not merely a historical event that took place nineteen centuries ago in Galilee. It represents the continuous and constant relationship of the Divine Saviour to suffering humanity. He is present in the world to-day in and through His Church. As of old we may bring to Him the sick and the sorrowful and the sinner. As many as touch Him, with the touch of faith, will be made whole.

The most serious malady that human nature can suffer is the malady of sin, for that is a malady that has eternal consequences. Physical disease cannot affect our eternal destiny, except by setting our minds on God and the treasure in heaven, and thereby making more certain the salvation of our souls. But sin destroys the inner sources of vitality and power. It strikes at the immortal core of our being. What a

blessing it would be if Jesus were still here, and it were possible for the sinner to go to Him and touch Him and be cured from his fatal malady! Is He here or not? If He is here, is it possible for us to touch Him and be made whole? No more important questions than these can be asked of the teachers of religion to-day.

Christian experience answers these questions in the affirmative. He is here, though the normal channel of His activity is His Church. He acts through His accredited ministers and representatives. We can touch Him and He touches us through the sacraments. He touched us first of all through the regenerative water of our Baptism; but again and again He heals us from sin through the restorative words of absolution. The healing effect of Baptism may of course be experienced only by adults, for they alone have committed actual transgressions; and adult baptism is rare to-day in Christian lands. But the healing effect of absolution is something we all may experience.

It is an experience that is most convincing. It can be adequately described only as the healing touch of Jesus. A man, for example, has struggled with temptation for many days, perhaps for many weeks. The struggle seems to him to be hopeless. He makes his confession, and suddenly his whole outlook upon life is transformed. Those particular temptations seem to have lost their power over him. The old desires are driven out, and the scars of past sins are healed. As he looks back at the man of a few days ago in the grip of temptation, it seems as though he were looking at another man than himself. He cannot believe that he could have been so allured by those temptations. What has happened? Nothing more nor less than a miracle of healing. It is really a greater miracle than the cure of a physical disease, because so much more important and far-reaching in its effects on the real life of the man.

There is nothing that so convinces one of the truth of religion as this transformation of the inner life resulting from con-

fession and absolution. One is then certain that the risen Jesus is indeed present in the midst of His Church, as the dogmatic teaching of the Church asserts. This conviction in turn reacts upon one's faith in other directions. The whole faith of the creeds appears more reasonable than before. Doubts and difficulties are dispelled. For this reason confession is often the best remedy for the intellectual difficulties of the sceptic. This is so, not because the sceptic is necessarily wallowing in the mire of sin, as is too often assumed by the orthodox; he may be living a very clean and respectable life. Confession is good for him because it brings him in contact with the healing touch of Jesus; and that effects an upheaval in his spiritual consciousness which he cannot ignore. This experience convinces him that the Christian religion is the source of real power; and therefore the mysteries of the faith appear more likely to be true.

The nature of this malady of the soul which is healed by absolution may be learned



by studying the diseases and imperfections healed by our Lord during His earthly ministry. This is not to deny the literalness of the narratives of healing contained in the gospels; it is simply to call attention to the striking similarity between the effects of these diseases on the body and the effects of sin on the soul. Sin is sometimes like palsy or paralysis, in that it paralyzes all moral effort and dissipates spiritual enthusiasm; sometimes like leprosy, in that it withers and deadens the activities of the spirit; sometimes like an issue of blood, in that it drains away our moral energy; and sometimes like a fever, in that it consumes the vital forces of the soul and spreads delirium to the mind. Sin enfeebles or destroys the perceptive faculties of the soul, leaving us spiritually blind or deaf; it renders us spiritually dumb and so incapable of prayer and worship, or lame and crippled and so unfit for works of mercy.

Jesus touches us through absolution, and all is changed. Our spiritual faculties regain their normal power; the consuming fire

of sin is extinguished; once more we have a relish for spiritual exercises and acts of devotion; for us all values seem to be trans-valued; and peace and harmony once more reign within the soul. The words of S. Cyprian, which describe so beautifully the enormous spiritual change wrought by his baptism, may be quoted as indicating something of the nature of this transformation of life brought about by absolution:

“After the stain of my earthly life had been washed away by the birth-wave, and a light from above poured into my purified and reconciled breast, and after I had drunk the Spirit from heaven and a second birth had restored and made me a new man—at once in a marvellous fashion my doubts began to be set at rest, doors which had been shut against me were thrown open, dark places grew light, what had seemed hard before was now easy of accomplishment, and what I had thought impossible was now seen to be within my power” (S. Cyprian, *Ad Donat. IV.*, quoted by Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church*, p. 115).

How supremely the world needs absolution to-day! The daily newspapers tell us the sad story of debauchery, intrigue, quarreling, bloodshed, war, and crime. Perhaps two-thirds of the news of every day is a chronicle of sin. One often lays down the paper with a sigh, rarely with a sense of inspiration. Moreover, the world realizes its evil plight. There are plenty of remedies being suggested every day. Take up the more serious monthly and quarterly magazines, or read the editorial columns of our great metropolitan dailies, or follow the reports of conventions and congresses, and you will learn of many remedies eagerly proposed for the sickness of the world—political remedies, legal remedies, medical remedies, and social remedies. One man tells us that socialism will rid us of all evils and usher in the millenium; another, that the proper kind of education will give us a new race of supermen; another, that if marriages were properly regulated and eugenic principles enforced, humanity would ultimately be saved by the gospel of good health.

But who shows any interest in these learned proposals? The oppressed workingman smokes his pipe and reads the "yellowest" newspaper he can buy; the tired business man attends the musical comedy or the vaudeville; and the blasè clubman spends his moments waiting for an engagement reading *Life* or *The Sketch*. It is a pathetic situation. Those who are the most infected by the sickness of the world have no interest in the cures offered them by the regenerators of mankind.

"The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint." We are all infected with the same fatal disease. There is only One who can heal us; and He is moving in and out amongst us on His errands of mercy, though our eyes are holden that we cannot see Him. Rich and poor, scientist and scrub-woman, capitalist and workingman, reformer and those who will not be reformed—we all need the healing touch of Jesus Christ. Sin is at the root of all human ills—social, economic, industrial, and political. Only the Divine forgiveness can cure sin. If the

whole world should go to confession tomorrow, the millenium would soon be here.

## **The Safeguard of Sincerity**



## CHAPTER VI

### THE SAFEGUARD OF SINCERITY 1

One of the most attractive qualities of human character is sincerity, as one of the most repulsive is hypocrisy. We cannot help admiring the man and the woman who are real, and who make no pretense to a character they do not possess; while we shrink from intimacy with those who, we suspect, are not quite what they appear to be. Our suspicions in regard to such people are usually well founded. One needs very little discrimination and experience to be able to distinguish the true quality of voice from the false, or to read the fine lines of the face as bearing witness to the reality or sham of the character behind



the face, or to judge from the eyes what manner of soul is looking through them.

There is a very simple method by which we may all acquire that sincerity which we all admit is so desirable an element of character; and that method is to reveal ourselves, the inmost secrets of our hearts, to someone else. It will not suffice simply to tell someone that we have this or that failing. We must lay bare our whole inner nature, everything wrong we have ever done or said or thought, our real character as it is in the sight of God and His holy angels—we must lay that bare to a fellow human being. Even if we let only one human being into the secret, provided we do it often, that will be enough to secure that sincerity and reality of character that we all admire.

Why is this? Because this disclosure of our real selves to another has made a breach in the wall. We can no longer assume any unreal attitude of holiness. Someone at least has seen what is really going on within. One of the spectators knows the secret; so what is the use of keeping up the pretense

any longer? That would only be to make ourselves ridiculous. Henceforth we may as well bear ourselves toward others as we are in reality—as miserable sinners.

It is surprising that the mere confession of our sins to one other human being can make such a difference. It seems almost like some uncanny psychological trick. Yet it is true to experience. The difference between the man who has never revealed to anyone the real state of his soul, and the man who frequently makes his confession, might be illustrated by a diagram. The one would be represented by two lines: the upper line, a fairly straight line, being his life as it is seen by the world; and the lower line, very broken and zigzag, being his life as it is in reality with its many lapses into sin. The other would be represented by one line, very irregular and crooked, it is true, but in the main tending upward; for that is his life as it really is, with many falls and recoveries, and as it is known to others through confession, and to God. The life of the self-contained is a double life; he is

one man to his fellow men, and quite another man to himself. The life of the man who has laid bare his soul to another, however full of failure and sin, is a single life—simple, childlike, and sincere.

This goal of sincerity would be attained, no matter to whom one might confess one's sins. A husband might lay bare his inmost being to his wife, or a wife to her husband. A child, as is right and proper, does often tell his father or mother the wrong things he has done. One might reveal the shameful secrets of one's past life to an intimate friend. Many people, in moments of illness or depression, tell their physician the real story of their lives—the story so little dreamed of by their friends and kindred. Business or legal difficulties often lead people to unbosom themselves to a lawyer.

But there are special advantages in choosing a priest as the man to whom you are to lay bare your soul. By his previous studies and his training he is especially fitted to deal with the diseases of the soul, just as the physician is best fitted to deal

with the diseases of the body. He can advise you and help you with regard to your spiritual and moral difficulties as no one else can. Moreover, he is under a sacred obligation of secrecy; for he cannot reveal, under pain of mortal sin, any knowledge he has gained through confession. Above all he can help you as no other man can, because in his ordination to the priesthood he received with the laying on of the Bishop's hands a Divine commission to grant absolution to the penitent.

Following are the words in the Ordinal, by which this commission is bestowed: "Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained." Elsewhere in the Book of Common Prayer it is declared that God "hath given power, and commandment, to His Ministers, to declare and pronounce to His people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins."

Striking testimony to the value of confession as a safeguard of sincerity has been given by the greatest American psychologist, William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (p. 462):

“For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun; he has exteriorized his rottenness. If he has not actually got rid of it, he at least no longer smears it over with a hypocritical show of virtue—he lives at least upon a basis of veracity. The complete decay of the practice of confession in Anglo-Saxon communities is a little hard to account for. Reaction against popery is, of course, the historical explanation, for in popery confession went with penances and absolution and other inadmissible practices. But on the side of the sinner himself it seems as if the need ought to have been too great to accept so summarily a refusal of its satisfaction. One would think that in more men the shell of secrecy would have had to open, the pent-in abscess to burst and gain relief, even though the ear that heard the confession were un-

worthy. The Catholic Church, for obvious utilitarian reasons, has substituted auricular confession to one priest for the more radical act of public confession. We English-speaking Protestants, in the general self-reliance and unsociability of our nature, seem to find it enough, if we take God alone into our confidence."

To claim that confession is a safeguard of sincerity is not to claim that everyone who does not go to confession is a hypocrite. There are many devout and gentle souls who have never committed mortal sin since they received the robe of baptismal innocence, and have never gone to confession. They are not hypocrites. Cardinal Manning generously testified, from his experience as an Anglican priest, that there were many known to him in the Church of England who had never committed mortal sin since their baptism. Have we not all known such devout souls, many of them perhaps very dear to us? They are the salt of the earth and the lights of the world in their several generations. To refuse to recog-

nize them and do them honor and thank God for them would be almost to sin against the Holy Ghost.

Moreover, there are many others who do not go to confession but have sinned grievously since their baptism, and yet they are not hypocrites. They make no pretense to righteousness; they acknowledge themselves wretched and miserable failures. It is not to gain sincerity and humility that they need confession, for they are sincere and humble. They need confession to gain the healing of the Divine forgiveness. Like the publicans and harlots with whom our Lord so freely mingled during His earthly ministry—to the horror of the Pharisees—they are not far from the kingdom of God. They realize their need of a physician, for they know they are sick. Now, as then, the Good Physician gathers them easily into His kingdom, and heals their sicknesses.

Nevertheless there are hypocrites now as there were in the days of our Lord's ministry among the Jews. Now, as then, they are often found among the most religious

people. Hypocrisy is always an insidious danger for those who handle the vessels of the Lord and frequent the courts of His Temple. Many a devout communicant of the Church who often receives the heavenly food of the Body and Blood of Christ is as proud and blind as were the Pharisees of old. Clergy and laity—we are all in great need of frequent confession as a preventive of a blind self-righteousness and a safeguard of sincerity.





## **Consulting the Expert**



## CHAPTER VII

### CONSULTING THE EXPERT

This particular argument in favor of confession was suggested by the newspaper report of a sermon preached by a Congregational minister in Milwaukee. He has since resigned from his Milwaukee charge. He was an up-to-date, efficient pastor, thoroughly modern in his methods, impatient of all bungling ways, prompt and regular as clock-work in the fulfilment of his ministerial duties. In this sermon, which was therefore quite in keeping with his character, he urged his people to apply modern business methods to the cultivation of their spiritual life. In every other department of life everyone recognized the necessity of knowing the facts before proceeding to ac-


tion. In business, education, health, and government, we all made haste to consult the expert. Why not in the business of the soul as well? The pastor was, or ought to be, an expert in such matters. The people should come to him with their spiritual and moral difficulties. In other words, they should come to him for confession.

In this era of efficiency, the expert has attained to a position of primary importance. Mr. Chesterton, who scorns efficiency, thinks it is one of the glaring defects of our time that we have put the expert on so high a pedestal. In our worship of experts we are in danger of losing our love of freedom and the joy of life, and of doing great injustice to the poor. At the word of an expert on insanity the English will imprison a man without giving him any kind of a chance to defend himself. We ourselves are almost ready to allow experts to determine whether a man or a woman may have any offspring or not. This warning of Mr. Chesterton's is undoubtedly needed.

But, in spite of Mr. Chesterton, we must

admit that the expert is a very useful person. The public health would be vastly improved if more people consulted expert doctors, instead of quacks and patent medicine advertisements in the newspapers. Our cities would be better governed if the departments were all governed by experts rather than by politicians; and more beautiful if expert architects were more often consulted. Without championing all the wild theories of eugenics, we may at least say that we feel happier about the marriage of two young people in whom we are interested, when they have presented certificates from an expert physician, showing that they are physically fit for married life. Of course we should not put all our trust in experts, nor in any child of man; for experts are not always infallible.

The priest is an expert in all things pertaining to religion. The soul should be his special concern. His training for the priesthood should have made him conversant with the laws of the spiritual life, and familiar with all ordinary cases of conscience. Pre-



sumably he has been through some kind of a course in moral and ascetic theology; and it is to be hoped that he has acquired some knowledge of morals inductively through diligent reading of the Bible and good modern novels and plays. It is not necessary, as some people suppose, that he should have committed a sin or been through an experience in order to administer the proper remedy, any more than it is necessary that a physician should have had all the diseases he is called upon to treat. It is, however, true that a priest is further qualified as an expert by his own experience in trying to live the spiritual life, and his experience in dealing with souls in the course of his ministry. If one goes to confession primarily to consult the spiritual expert, one should of course go to an older and more experienced priest. But it should always be remembered that the priest, like all other experts, is not always infallible.

The priest can give expert advice only after hearing a person's confession. Otherwise he cannot have before him all the

facts. He knows only the person's address and occupation, the color of his hair and the cut of his clothes. But those are not the important facts. The only way a priest can determine what is the besetting sin of the person who comes to him for advice, or suggest the best remedy for overcoming a particular temptation, is through confession. Only thus can a priest give the necessary warning to the growing boy or girl at the proper psychological moment; or impart moral instruction to the child, "precept upon precept," as he is able to bear it. People often ask a priest how often they should make their communion or what daily prayers they should use. No priest can give a satisfactory answer to such questions until people have let him see the real condition of their souls by means of sacramental confession. No doubt a priest might attempt to solve a perplexing moral problem apart from confession; but confession would often throw needed light upon the relation of the problem to the particular soul involved.

There is of course a danger that people



may get into the way of consulting their priest too frequently and on too trivial matters. Such people expect a priest to take the place of conscience; but that is not one of the functions for which he was ordained. This is a very real danger with weak-minded or over-scrupulous people. They appeal to their priest to decide every little question: where they should live, how much rent they should pay, what pleasures they should indulge in, what food they should abstain from, and what people they should go with. They ought to be able to decide such questions for themselves. That is what conscience is for. It is only in cases where the conscience is really perplexed, and prayer does not seem to bring a solution, that the priest should be resorted to for help. This running to the priest to settle every little perplexity would soon result in nervous prostration for the priest and the loss of all moral stamina for those who run. A priest must deal sternly with such people, for their own good and his.

“Consult the expert” may convey to

some the impression of arrogance and pride on the part of the priest. It suggests a cold, judicial person, far removed from the daily struggles and worries of our common lot, uttering dogmatic decisions from a throne. This idea might tend to frighten people away from confession; and therefore it should be used as an argument with great caution. Too many people already are afraid to let a priest know the real state of their souls; and this fear must not be increased by giving them a false notion of a priest as a sort of divine, infallible being, untouched by the common weaknesses of our flesh and blood.

The truth is, of course, that the priest is a creature of flesh and blood like the rest of us. Every day he has his struggles with temptation; and, no doubt, he has often fallen into sin. The temptations of the clergy are probably more subtle and powerful than those that assail the laity; it is natural that Satan should direct his fiercest attacks against the leaders of the army of Christ. Just because the priest is com-

passed about with infirmities, he is able to be sympathetic and merciful toward those who err. He is deeply interested in the spiritual combat going on in the world, for he is in the thick of it himself. He rejoices with the saints and angels in heaven over every sinner that is truly converted and led to repentance.

A young prodigal once confessed his sins to an aged priest. He had sinned very grievously, and he esteemed the priest as a saint. He began haltingly and timidly mentioning some of his less serious shortcomings; and looking up at the old priest's face, he thought he saw the traces of a smile. He took courage and spoke of very shameful acts; and then stopped, afraid to go on. Observing that the smile was still there, he made a supreme effort and confessed the blackest sin of his past life. Looking up, he was astonished to find the old man's face more radiant than ever. Finally he boldly asked the priest, "Father, why do you smile?" "My son," replied the old man, "I was smiling as I thought of the

joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."

If the Church is to minister to the spiritual needs of the men and women of to-day, she must provide some such spiritual expert to whom they may frequently resort to reveal the inmost secrets of their hearts. Failing in this, she would fail to meet one of the deepest and most universal of human needs. Catholics believe, of course, that the Church has met this need in the priesthood, to whom God has given power and commandment to declare and pronounce to His people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins. Protestants do not as a rule believe in auricular confession; and yet many of them to-day are coming to recognize the value of more intimate personal conference between the pastor and the individual soul. They realize that to consult the expert and get skilled advice as to the condition of their souls is in harmony with the whole modern trend in the direction of greater efficiency.











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